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Stukker, Ninke

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Ninke Stukker*

Genre as a factor determining the viewpoint-marking quality of verb tenses

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Abstract: Verb tenses play an important role in managing deictic relations between the narrator, the audience and the events happening in the story world. Across languages, the Simple Past is considered the conventional story-telling tense, reflecting the prototypical deictic configuration of stories in which the narrator is positioned at some distance from the events unfolding in the story. The Simple Present, on the other hand, is considered a marked option for narration, assumed to automatically result in a shift to a subjective perspective. This paper reports on an analysis of a corpus made up of Dutch fictional short stories, news reports and feature articles. The results suggest that conventions for use and interpretation of verb tenses in narrative contexts are in fact genre-dependent. In the news genres, the Simple Present tense dominated in narration. This did not automatically result in a subjective mode or narration, but was naturally used to express a default narration of story events that temporally overlap with the temporal deictic center of the communicative ground. These findings suggest that previous analyses of verb tenses in relation to narration reflect an over-generalization based on the situational characteristics of prototypical narrative genres such as literary fiction and personal anecdotes.

Keywords: verb tenses, narrative text strategies, discourse genre, literary short stories, news genres, time structure

1 Introduction

Linguistic narratives occur in a multitude of genres and media, ranging from literary fiction, magazines and news media to weblogs, advertisements, public service communications and many more. A large body of evidence has shown that proficient language users adapt the linguistic form of their utterances to their situational contexts of use (Biber and Conrad 2009). Therefore, one would expect linguistic characteristics of narratives to vary in accordance with the

*Corresponding author: Ninke Stukker, Center for Language and Cognition Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands, E-mail: N.M.Stukker@RUG.nl

genre in which they are embedded. Although narratology has a long tradition acknowledging the immense variety of narrative formats, study of linguistic variation across narrative genres is lagging. Linguistically oriented narratologists and stylisticians have been interested mainly in identifying universal narrative linguistic strategies, contrasting narrative styles across text types at the expense of genre-related stylistic variation *within* the larger narrative category (cf. Fludernik 2000; Georgakopoulou 2005). This risks over-generalization of findings from one narrative genre to another.

Verb tenses are a case in point. In narrative texts, verb tenses – specifically imperfect tenses which are the focus of this paper – coordinate the relation between the communicative ground, defined here as the communicative situation including its participants and immediate circumstances (cf. Langacker 1990), on the one hand, and the story world, including the story characters and the events in the story, on the other hand. Like their equivalents in many other languages, the Dutch Simple Past and Simple Present tenses indicate whether the content expressed in a given clause is situated at a “larger distance” or at a “smaller or no distance” (Haeseryn et al. 1997 [1984]; E-ANS 2.4.8.2) respectively to the communicative ground. Across languages, the Simple Past is considered to be the default story-telling tense, reflecting the prototypical deictic configuration of stories in which the events unfolding are situated at some distance from the ground (on English see e.g. Biber and Conrad 2009; on German see Fludernik 1993; on French see Fleischman 1990; on Dutch see Onrust et al. 1993). This distance can be temporal; cf. (1) taken from a newspaper article originally published in Dutch.¹ The Simple Past tense forms in clauses (1a)–(1d) refer to events that preceded the “here-and-now” of the communicative ground in the empirical reality shared by the newspaper editors and their audience on the date of publication in November 2003.

- (1) (a)² Ahmed had little reason to complain (b) when after nine months he could legally take up residence in the Netherlands. (c₁) Though, (d) in the fights that followed, (c₂) he referred to that forced stay in his motherland as a tremendous sacrifice. (e) He returns to the Netherlands in December 2002. (f) The first blows come in April this year. (g) He rips off Helen’s necklace (h) and throws a pan of boiling water at her.

1 The Appendix presents the original Dutch versions of the text fragments quoted including source information. Translations by the author.

2 Letters in round brackets refer to clause numbers for ease of reference.

The distance indicated by the Simple Past tense can also be purely conceptual without being temporal. This is illustrated in excerpt (2), taken from a fictional short story originally published in Dutch:

- (2) His brother got hit by a truck on the road from Kaltern to Eppan. The driver hadn't seen him. It was a summer day, shortly before harvest of the red-green Gravensteiner apple. His brother did not recover from his injuries. For three days and two nights he endured the most horrendous pain. Then he lost his life.

The deictic position of fictional stories cannot be defined in temporal terms in relation to the actual empirical communicative ground, including the author and its readers. Rather, the Simple Past tenses in (2) must be interpreted in relation to a fictional ground including a fictional narrator, but not including the audience in the communicative ground in empirical reality (cf. Leech and Short 2007 [1981]: chapter 8). Hence, past tenses in fictional narratives “signif[y] a kind of unspecified past whose relation to the present moment of reading is one of distancing rather than precise location” (Fludernik 2003: 121). Consequently, the deictic position of fictional stories must be understood in conceptual rather than in temporal distance terms.

By contrast, use of the Simple Present tense, lacking this distancing quality, has been labeled “clearly irregular” in narrative contexts (Fludernik 2003: 123) or even “anti-narrative” (Fleischman 1990: 11). Yet, it is by no means absent in narrative texts, as is exemplified in clauses (1e)–(1h) in excerpt (1) above. A common assumption is that usage of the Simple Present tense in a narrative context more or less automatically results in a very specific and marked conceptual effect, known as “historical present” (see Nijk, this issue) or “narrative present” (Fludernik 2003). The former specifically refers to Present tense narration of past time events; the latter refers somewhat more generally to any type of subjective experiential narration using the Present tense. Excerpt (1) contains an example of the former type; an example of narrative present (3) will be discussed below. Historical present and narrative present readings share their characteristic of evoking a sense of immediacy, or subjectivity, regarding the situation or events described, thus granting the audience direct access to the story events as experienced by the narrator or character. The strong association between the Simple Present tense and a subjective interpretation of narration has inspired various studies to view the use of the Simple Present form in narrative contexts in itself as a signal for viewpoint shifting (see for example: Fludernik 2003; Dancygier 2011; Onrust et al. 1993).

Viewpoint refers to the human capability to perceive other human beings as intentional agents and mental agents like themselves. It allows us to identify with conspecifics and their emotions, beliefs and perceptions, and to empathize (Tomasello 1999: 14–15, 2008; for an extensive discussion, see Van Duijn and Verhagen Forthcoming). In linguistic theory, viewpoint has been defined as the relation between a subject of conceptualization – a mental and intentional agent – and an object of conceptualization – which is what the discourse is about. Viewpoint enters the discourse if the *subject* of conceptualization (the speaker, author, or an embedded speaker such as a story character), including its mental capacities, becomes a part of the *object* of conceptualization (Langacker 1990; Verhagen 2007).

This is what happens in excerpt (1), when in clause (1e) the verb tense shifts from Simple Past used in (1a)–(1d), indicating that the story events described are situated at some distance of the communicative ground situated in the empirical world, to the Simple Present tense, used from clause (1e) onwards. The text to which the excerpt belongs narrates events involving domestic violence. As the most likely interpretation of excerpt (1) is that the chain of events is chronologically ordered, we cannot interpret the Simple Present tense as an indication of temporal overlap between the story events and the communicative ground – which is considered to be the more prototypical reading of the Simple Present tense in Dutch (Haeseryn 1997; E-ANS: 24.8.3) and many other languages. The temporal adverbial phrase *April this year*, knowing that the article was published six months later, corroborates this interpretation. For these reasons it is likely that the tense shift in clause (1e) signals a shift from a retrospective journalist's viewpoint – the viewpoint associated with the communicative ground in empirical reality – to a deictic reference point in the story world, which in this case should be considered as a fictional construction of the journalist. By referring to the fictional communicative ground in the story world, the Simple Present tense fictionally construes the story characters as subjects of conceptualization whose subjective experiences of the events described enter the content of the text. The Simple Present thus functions as a marker of the story characters' subjective viewpoint blending the narrator's viewpoint into the story world (cf. Sanders & Van Krieken, this issue).

Excerpt (3), taken from a fictional short story originally published in Dutch, is an example of what Fludernik (2003) would call narrative present.

- (3) *Naast me fietst een deftige heer op het weggetje en opeens knapt z'n achterband met een luide knal. De heer kijkt even naar beneden, kijkt een beetje lachend naar mij en fietst gewoon door.*
 'An elegant gentleman cycles [sic] on the road next to me, and suddenly his back tire explodes with a loud bang. The gentleman looks down for a moment, looks at me and smiles a bit and just cycles on.'

Narrative present deviates slightly from historical present in a *formal* sense in that it is not preceded by a stretch of discourse using Simple Past tense and, thus, does not include a viewpoint shift. It is typically associated with fiction, “referring to the use of the present tense (in lieu of the traditional past tense) for long units of a fictional text, frequently an entire novel or short story” (Fludernik 2003: 123). Its conceptual *effect*, by contrast, is highly similar to historical present, if not entirely the same. In manner very similar to (1), it construes conceptual proximity to a fictional reference point which does not coincide with the actual communicative ground. As the focus of this paper is on the conceptual effects of the verb tense forms rather than on formal aspects from the surrounding text,³ historical present and narrative present will be merged and will be referred to from now on as one single category of *subjectified narration*.

Note, by the way, that the Dutch language differs from English but is similar to many other languages, in that it allows ongoing events to be described using the Simple Present, whereas speakers of English would use the progressive form. To most speakers of English, the direct translation of the Dutch Simple Present form *fietst* with ‘cycles’ instead of ‘was cycling’ in (3) probably sounds odd, if not wrong. This can be explained by the fact that in English, Present Tense sentences are “intrinsically state sentences” (Michaelis 2006). Simple Present tense can only be used for expressing events if “generic sentences describing multiple instances of a given event” are concerned, e.g. “The catholic mass is recited in Latin” (Michaelis 2006: 14–16). In my translation of the text excerpts I will use direct translations of Dutch action and event verbs marked with [*sic*].

Despite minor language-specific differences regarding conventions of use such as this one, the subjective viewpointing effect of subjectified narration across languages can be explained with reference to a mismatch between the function of the Present Tense and the context of pastness it is used in. However, it is in relating the more general functions of the verb tenses to their specific narrative functions discussed above that an interesting genre bias occurs. The common association between the Simple Past and the default (non-subjectified) narrative text function has been explained with reference to its inherent distance-marking quality, which matches the prototypical story quality of being told from a retrospective vantage (Fleischman 1990). By contrast, the Simple Present tense, which inherently expresses temporal overlap between the events

³ This is not to suggest that formal differences are irrelevant to processes of discourse interpretation. I will return to this issue in the Discussion section below.

or situations presented and the communicative ground, is incompatible with the prototypically assumed distance between ground and story world. Hence, the Simple Present is assumed to coerce the reader's interpretation into a fictional sense of conceptual overlap with the communicative ground, thus resulting in the subjective experiential interpretation exemplified in (1) and (3) above (Onrust et al. 1993; Fludernik 2003).

This line of reasoning holds for any narrative genre that conventionally construes the story at some distance from the ground, such as personal anecdotes, which typically narrate a completed line of events that happened in the past. It also holds for fictional genres, in which the story is situated in a fictional story world ontologically different from the empirical world intersubjectively shared by the actual narrator and the audience in the ground. By contrast, this line of reasoning does *not* apply to stories narrating events that *do* temporally overlap with the communicative ground. News reports are an obvious example of this category. The narrative chain of events presented in news reports normally originates temporally prior to the communicative situation (otherwise, the reporter could not write about it). However, it is not at all uncommon for news stories to contain elements that are *not* yet past at the time they are communicated to the audience, upon publication of the story in a news medium. The final sentence of the news report below is an example:

- (4) UTRECHT – A woman's purse was snatched in the Wolvenstraat in Utrecht. Two young men accosted the woman, taking her purse in the process. The two then made a run for it. Police searched the area, but did not find the men. The police hope [*sic*] that witnesses to the event will come forward.

The final sentence is unambiguously part of the storyline. Note that the text does not contain a story outcome or resolution (for example: the thieves being caught, or the case being closed). It ends in the middle, likely to be followed up (Bell 1991) in a later edition of the medium. The “unfinished” nature is a conventional characteristic of news stories. It is explained by the functioning of news media reporting current events as they develop, updating the audience on newsworthy developments in each new edition (daily in newspapers, several times per day in digital news sites). In fact, the expectation that further developments *will* follow (solving or not solving the case) is projected in the final sentence of the news report in (4), which refers to an ongoing involvement of the police, instead of referring to merely a comment in retrospect.

There are no textual or contextual indications that the shift to the Simple Present tense in this text should be interpreted as a shift to subjectified narration. The tense shift in the final sentence simply signals the fact that the situation

described in the sentence still applied at the point in time when the news report was published in empirical reality, thus indicating temporal overlap between the story world and the communicative ground. One could argue on the ground of its lexical meaning that the verb *hope* refers to a private mental state belonging to one specific individual subject of conceptualization and thus establishes a shift to an individual's subjective viewpoint as discussed in Section 1. In the given context, however, this interpretation is highly unlikely. A more plausible interpretation would be that it refers to an officially established and collectively adopted policy of a given team of police officers, made publicly accessible by a press conference or a public statement. Examples like these suggest that the Dutch Simple Present tense *can* be used to express default, non-subjectified narration instead of Simple Past – despite strong assumptions to the contrary in mainstream narratological and stylistic analysis. More examples will be discussed below.

2 Contrastive analysis of the imperfect verb tenses in Dutch fictional short stories, news reports and feature articles

The observations presented above suggest the hypothesis that conventions of use as well as the interpretation of verb tenses in narrative texts are genre-dependent. This hypothesis was tested in a contrastive analysis of the distribution, meanings and uses of the Simple Present tense in Dutch fictional short stories and two Dutch narrative news genres. Texts in these genres are narrative in the sense that they describe temporally and causally related events involving one or more specific individuals who attempt to overcome obstacles and accomplish a specific goal (Zwaan and Rapp 2006; see also Stein and Glenn 1979; Trabasso and Van den Broek 1985; Semino and Short 2004). Note that this definition takes the underlying, cognitive story structure as its starting point, rather than the specific discourse constructions used to present the story. This is in line with the classic distinction between the *fabula*, or *story proper*, referring to the story events as they (could) have occurred in reality or in a fictional story world in terms of chronological and causal ordering on the one hand, and on the other hand its *rendering* in discourse (referred to as *sjuzhet* or *discourse* – see Toolan [2001] for an overview), which may vary according to the author's communicative purposes and other rhetorical intentions. The present paper intends to analyze variation at the *discourse* level of narrativity, studying the way situational factors associated with genre affect choices of verb tenses for rendering the story proper.

2.1 Corpus

The analyzed short stories were originally published in the final decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. They were taken from an anthology produced and distributed in 2015 by the association for marketing of Dutch book publishers (Snijders 2015). Fifteen stories were selected for study. These contained the prototypical genre characteristics of limited length, a single theme, few characters, and limited attention to and complexity of the setting and evolution of the central character (Van Bork et al. 2012).

Two common Dutch news genres were included in the analysis as well. The first genre, the *nieuwsverhaal* (news report⁴), differs from the second news genre, *reportage* (roughly equivalent to the English journalistic feature article) with respect to viewpoint conventions. News reports conventionally present news events in a neutral, objectified manner (Asbreuk and De Moor 2013: 407; Kussendrager and Van der Lugt 2007: 232). Feature articles, by contrast, present news events from an insider perspective. They are a reconstructed version of the journalist's subjective eyewitness reports and personal experiences on-site and, by extension, of the motives, perceptions and emotions of the individuals who played a role in the reported events (Asbreuk and De Moor 2013: 408; Kussendrager and van der Lugt 2007: 304). Viewpoint blending and viewpoint embedding are conventional narrative techniques construing these rhetorical effects (Sanders and Van Krieken, this issue).

A total of fifteen news reports and fifteen feature articles satisfying the genre conditions were randomly selected from 2001–2003 issues of three major Dutch “quality” daily newspapers.⁵ As the genre conventions pertaining to temporal deixis and viewpoint discussed above concern the narrator's self-presentation, direct quotes (in which the narrator's viewpoint is commonly believed to be absent⁶) were excluded from analysis. Since both first person and third person

⁴ Dutch journalism makes a distinction within this genre that does not seem to have a clear equivalent in UK or US journalism. *Nieuwsbericht* refers to the shorter variety, including no more than 30 lines. *Nieuwsverhaal* (literally “news story”) by contrast consists of approximately 100 lines and typically includes information from various sources – which are typically lacking in *nieuwsbericht* (Asbreuk and De Moor 2013: 407). This study analyzes the Dutch genre of *nieuwsverhaal*.

⁵ *NRC Handelsblad*, *De Volkskrant* and *Trouw*. Data from this corpus were discussed earlier in Stukker (2016).

⁶ Even if the narrator and the quoted speaker are referentially the same person (which could be the case in first person narration), their communicative roles differ fundamentally. Direct speech imitates a “real life action” of a story character (mimesis), whereas the communicative act of narration (diegesis) describes story events, not directly performing them.

narration naturally allow for neutral and subjective narration using Simple Present and Simple Past tenses, no selection was made for narration type in this respect. The texts in the corpus were segmented into clauses, each of which potentially contained one finite, tensed verb form.

The genres differed in text length. The news report genre typically consists of “100 lines” in newspaper column width (Kussendrager and van der Lugt 2007: 232), whereas the feature articles run from 600 to 1,200 words, often taking up a full newspaper page (Asbreuk and De Moor 2013: 408). Length requirements for fictional short stories are less strict, and usually stated in relative terms (such as: shorter than novellas and novels, but longer than the anecdote, Van Bork et al. 2012: first paragraph). As the present study analyzes how genre characteristics affect verb tense choices and interpretations, and as text length is a definitional characteristic of the genres under study, no corrections for text length were made.

By convention, and like many other narrative genres, narrative news genres contain moves that do not belong to the “story proper”, defined as the main storyline consisting of a temporally and causally ordered series of events involving the main story characters. The act of narration may be interrupted, for example, by a journalist’s or a quoted source’s comment on the story, by presentation of background information or by follow-up information referring to future actions (Bell 1991). As the present study focuses on narrative functions of verb tenses, non-narrative moves were identified and discarded from the analysis using Bell’s model of the news genre. Table 1 summarizes the corpus characteristics.

Table 1: Corpus characteristics.

	Short stories	Feature articles	News reports
Number of texts	15	15	15
Number of clauses	3,784	1,475	349
Number of narrative clauses (direct quotes and non-narrative moves excluded)	2,654	730	157

2.2 Analysis

The analysis consisted of two steps. First, the distribution of the Simple Present and Simple Paste tenses in narrative clauses was analyzed and compared between genres. Second, the meanings of the Simple Present tense were reconstructed and compared between genres. Usages were counted as “default,

non-subjectified narration” if the Simple Present tense form expressed temporal overlap between the story event expressed and the communicative ground. The communicative ground was defined equally for all of the genres, as including a real-life narrator and an audience in the empirically accessible world. Usages were classified as “subjectified narration” if the Simple Present tense form referred to a “ground” associated with a subject of conceptualization who was not the narrator in actual empirical reality, and which was embedded in the communicative ground, such as a past time reality or a fictional story world. In line with the definitions discussed in Section 1, a second condition was that the Present Tense form evoked a subjective viewpoint associated with a subject of conceptualization belonging to the fictional (or fictionalized past time) ground.

In accordance with these conditions, classification was established by systematically answering a set of two questions. The first question was: Does the clause in which the Simple Present tense form occurs or its immediate context contain elements indicating that the Simple Present does *not* refer to the timeline applying to the empirical communicative ground? By way of an example consider (5), discussed earlier as (1):

- (5) (a) Ahmed had little reason to complain (b) when after nine months he could legally take up residence in the Netherlands. (c₁) Though, (d) in the fights that followed, (c₂) he referred to that forced stay in his motherland as a tremendous sacrifice. (e) He returns to the Netherlands in December 2002. (f) The first blows come in April this year. (g) He rips off Helen’s necklace (h) and throws a pan of boiling water at her.

Clauses (5e)–(5h) do not contain any of the subjectivity markers discussed in relation to the first analytical step discussed above. Yet the context contains elements (in the chronological flow of events and the temporal adverbial phrase in clause [5f] – see the discussion of this excerpt in Section 1) indicating that the Simple Present does *not* express temporal overlap between the story event expressed and the communicative ground. It rather expresses a fictionalized conceptual nearness to a different ground in past time associated with the minds of the story characters, and not directly accessible to any of the participants in the communicative ground.

The second question was: Does the clause, or its immediately preceding linguistic context (up to one paragraph), contain subjective expressions referring to a private mental state, not accessible to the communicative participants in the ground? Well-known examples concern adjectives, verbs and adverbs expressing epistemic (regarding knowledge states), deontic (regarding social obligations and possibilities) and affective modality (regarding evaluative judgments and emotions). Modal expressions are viewed as prototypical examples of

linguistic expressions of subjective stance (cf. Gray and Biber 2012; Sweetser 2012; Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996; Lyons 1995). Excerpt (3) above, repeated below for convenience as (6), contains examples of this type.

- (6) An elegant gentleman cycles [*sic*] on the road next to me, and suddenly his back tire explodes with a loud bang. The gentleman looks down for a moment, looks at me and smiles a bit and just cycles on.

The adjectives *loud* and *elegant* express affective modality. They construe private mental states of a subject of conceptualization which are not directly observable to the audience in the empirical communicative ground because they are experienced in an individual, private mind.

If both of the questions were answered with YES, the Simple Present tense form was classified as subjectified narration. If one or both of the questions were answered with NO, it was classified as default non-subjectified narration.

3 Results

Table 2 reports the distribution of verb tenses occurring in narrative moves across the genres analyzed. The distribution corroborates the common narratological assumption (discussed in Section 1) that imperfect verb tenses play a major role in expressing narration. The distribution found also presents a first indication that the relative importance of the Simple Past tense differs across genres.

Table 2: Distribution of verb tenses in narrative clauses across the genres under study.

	Short stories	Feature articles	News reports
Simple Present	135	526	76
Perfect	33	43	24
Simple Past	1,926	120	48
Pluperfect	180	5	1
Future tenses	67	10	8
Elliptical clause	313	26	0
Total number of narrative clauses	2,654	730	157

This hypothesis was tested by comparing the distribution of Simple Past and Simple Present across the genres more directly. Binary logistic regression was used to assess to what extent the genre correctly predicts whether Simple Past or

Simple Present tense is selected for expressing narration. Genre turned out to be a significant predictor ($X^2(2) = 1464.02$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.40$ [Cox & Snell], correctly classifying 89% of the cases). Each of the genres contributes significantly to the model. As expected, the probability of Simple Past tense to be used is highest in short stories, and lowest in a feature article; the news report genre is somewhere in between.⁷

As a next step, the meanings expressed by the Simple Present tense were analyzed (Table 3). In this case, too, genre turned out to be a significant predictor of meaning type ($X^2(2) = 253.34$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.29$ [Cox & Snell], correctly classifying 74% of the cases). Again, each of the genres contributes significantly to the model. As expected, the probability that a Simple Present tense form is interpreted as default, non-subjectified narration is highest in news reports and lowest in short stories; the feature article genre is somewhere in between.⁸

7 If news reports are chosen as a reference category ($B \text{ constant} = -0.46$): News reports compared to short stories: $B = 3.12$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 231.85$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 22.6$, indicating that the probability that Simple Past tense is selected for expressing narration increases with a factor 22.6 if it occurs in a short story when compared to a news report; news reports compared to feature articles: $B = -1.018$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 23.45$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.36$, indicating that the probability for Simple Past to occur in a narrative sentence decreases with a factor 0.36 if it occurs in a feature article when compared to a news report. If short stories are chosen as a reference category ($B \text{ constant} = 2.66$): Short stories compared to feature articles: $B = -4.14$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 941.81$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.016$, indicating that the probability for Simple Past to occur in a narrative sentence decreases with a factor 0.16 if it occurs in a feature article when compared to a short story; short stories compared to news reports: $B = -3.12$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 231.85$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.044$ indicating that the probability for Simple Past to occur in a narrative sentence decreases with a factor 0.044 if it occurs in a news report when compared to a short story.

8 If news reports are chosen as a reference category ($B \text{ constant} = 4.32$): news reports compared to short stories: $B = -9.22$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 42.02$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.000$, indicating that the probability that a Simple Present tense form is interpreted as default, non-subjectified narration decreases so strongly it cannot be expressed using the standard decimal procedure in SPSS if it occurs in a short story when compared to a news report; news reports compared to feature articles: $B = -4.9$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 23.54$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.007$, indicating that the probability that a Simple Present tense form is interpreted as default, non-subjectified narration strongly decreases with a factor 0.007 if it occurs in a feature article when compared to a news report. If short stories are chosen as a reference category ($B \text{ constant} = -4.90$): Short stories compared to feature articles: $B = 4.31$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 18.30$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 74.53$, indicating that the probability that a Simple Present tense form is interpreted as default, non-subjectified narration increases with a factor 74.53 if it occurs in a feature article when compared to a short story; short stories compared to news reports: $B = 9.22$, Wald. $X^2(1) = 42.02$, $p < 0.001$; $\text{Exp}(B) = 10,050$, indicating that the probability that a Simple Present tense form is interpreted as default, non-subjectified narration increases with a factor 10,050 if it occurs in a news report when compared to a short story.

Table 3: Distribution of subjectified and default narrative readings of the simple present tense across genres.

	Short stories	Feature articles	News stories
Subjectified narration	135	338	0
Default non-subjectified narration	0	188	76
Total number Simple Present	135	526	76

The Simple Present cases in the short stories were examples of subjectified narration construing a subjective narrator’s viewpoint (see e.g. fragment [3] above). Fragment (7) below is another example:

- (7) (a) He stayed at Floris’ for three months. (...) (b) He didn’t mind (c) that we kept calling him Hohoho. (d) Soon we shortened it to Hoho (...) (e) But then one day he just disappeared overnight; (f) some said he took Floris’ bank card and laptop, (g) but Floris never confirmed this. (h) I never asked about it either, (i) and now it’s too late, (j) we lost contact with each other ages ago (...) (k) I sometimes see one of them on the street, (l) then I greet them politely, (m) I don’t miss any of them.

The excerpt above represents the final part of a story about a group of friends who let a drifter into their circle. One acts as the narrator. Most of the story is presented in the Simple Past tense, reflecting the narrator’s retrospective vantage point. The narrative part representing the story resolution starts in (7e) when the drifter disappears. The shift to Simple Present tense in (7i) indicates that the storyline continues into the narrative present time. It additionally signals a shift to the narrator’s own subjective viewpoint: the narrator in the story shifts from first person plural pronouns to the first person singular in (7k). *Too* in (7i), representing his subjective judgment, and *miss* in (7m), referring to a private mental state, are additional indications that the audience should adopt the narrator’s viewpoint to interpret the narration coherently.

Subjectified narration in feature articles included cases of historical present (presenting events situated in the narrative past and involving a tense shift – see [1] above), as well as cases of narrative present, referring to story events situated at a conceptual distance or, in the case of news reports, a temporal distance from the communicative ground but *not* including a tense shift (cf. Section 1). The latter type was especially frequent in the feature articles analyzed. It occurred consistently at two specific points in the story structure: (i) the

orientation, introducing story characters, setting a scene or introducing an initiating event (see e.g. Bell 1991) and (ii) the resolution. Fragment (8), representing the start of narration of the same feature article excerpt (1) was taken from, is a representative example of the latter type:

- (8) ([a] “I want to go home”),⁹ (b) says Heleen Mooiman (28) from The Hague. ([c] This simple wish will not be fulfilled for the time being. [d] For this she has the court in The Hague to thank. [e] In August it generously let her ex-fiancé off the hook, [f] twelve days after he had beaten her badly.) .. (j) Some of the marks are still visible. (k) For safety reasons, the interview takes place in a cafe in a nearby town. (l) She is holding up pretty well, (m) but every now and then the emotions overwhelm her.

Clauses (8a)–(8m) have a complex deictic structure. At the content level, they represent the (provisional) outcome of a story involving a real world “character”, Heleen Mooiman, victim of domestic violence. The journalist, who is the actual narrator of the text, uses the Simple Present in clauses (8b) and (8j) through (8m) to describe events that happened in the empirical past time. Clause (8l) contains an expression of attitudinal stance (*pretty well*) signaling that the subjective viewpoint of the interviewer – who probably referentially coincides with the journalist in her role as the narrator, but who is construed here as an eye-witness to the events – enters the discourse. Stance markers are absent in the other clauses, but as the verbs clearly refer to states and events that were valid at the moment when the interview took place and not at the moment the article was published, the Simple Present tense forms in (8j), (8k) and (8l) were classified as subjectified narration. The objects of the interviewer/journalist’s observations can be interpreted in direct relation to the story events; they are presented as evidence for the events reported in the article by the interviewee in her role as news source consulted by the journalist. The events themselves obviously took place in the absence of the journalist, but by reporting the visual evidence, alongside the report of the interviewee in the narration that will follow, the journalist acts as an eye-witness to the event. This allows the audience to become mediated witnesses (Van Krieken et al. 2015).

Finally, as expected, in both news genres, the Simple Present tense was naturally and consistently used in a default, non-subjectified narrative sense, lacking any sign of subjectivity. In (9), below, taken from a news report and

⁹ Parentheses signal text parts that were discarded from analysis due to being direct quotes or non-narrative clauses.

representative of the pattern, shifts from Simple Past to Simple Present simply indicate a shift from the past to the present empirical *time*; they do not involve a viewpoint shift. All of the events narrated belong to the same intersubjectively shared empirical reality:

- (9) (a₁) The perpetrators, (b) a 20-year-old man from the Netherlands Antilles and a 19-year-old man of Dutch origin, (a₂) contradicted themselves and each other on the question of (c) who fired the shots (d) and who stayed outside to keep lookout. (e) Prosecutor I. Meissen concluded (f) that the 19-year-old must have fired the shots (g), and therefore asked for twelve years prison for him and ten years for the 20-year-old. (h) The court concurs with the prosecutor's conclusion concerning the roles in the offence. (i) According to the court, surveillance camera images show indisputably (j) that the 19-year-old fired the shots. (k) Admittedly his face was not recognizable on the images, (l) but his shoes were. (m₁) The court considers the claim made by both suspects, (n) that they swapped shoes on the road, (m₂) to be improbable.

Note that (9) contains a number of non-subjective references to mental states in (9e) (*concluded*), (9m) (*considers improbable*), and possibly also *concurs* in (9h) as characterized in the discussion of excerpt (4) in Section 1. In the given context, however, a more likely interpretation is that the court proceedings were publicly communicated on-site (or even performed “I herewith concur..”) and recorded in public records afterwards. Reporting the judgments does not cause any shifts in viewpoint, but merely describes a state of affairs that is valid, and even empirically accessible, at the time of publication of the article.

4 Discussion

The findings reported in this paper suggest that common assumptions regarding the meanings and uses of verb tenses in narrative contexts reflect an over-generalization based on the situational characteristics of prototypical narrative genres such as fictional short stories and personal anecdotes. Rather, conventions for use and even interpretation of verb tenses in narrative contexts seem to be genre-dependent. The common assumption that the Simple Past tense is the default option for narration, for example, does not hold for Dutch narrative news genres, which are strongly dominated by the Simple Present tense. Similarly, the common assumption that usage of the Simple Present in a narrative context

automatically results in a subjective interpretation, or even functions as a linguistic marker of the historical present or narrative present, needs to be qualified in relation to the discourse genre in which it is used. The analysis reported in this paper suggests that the Simple Past and Simple Present tense forms do nothing specific beyond instructing the reader or hearer to relate the story event described to a point at some (large or small) temporal or conceptual distance from a deictic center that is salient in the given context – which is the abstract semantic value ascribed to these tense forms across languages.

My data suggests that situational characteristics associated with a given discourse genre are an important factor defining the contextual salience of a specific deictic center among the potentially salient ones present in the discourse. Skilled, genre-literate language users know that by convention, the deictic center in short stories is a fictional reference point, implying a fictional subject of consciousness (the narrator or a story character) whose subjective viewpoint the audience must adopt in order to understand the narration. Once this reference point is selected, the options for interpretation of the Simple Present tense are restricted to “fictional proximity”, since an interpretation in terms of “temporal proximity to the communicative ground” is prohibited by the fictional nature of the deictic center.

In news genres, by contrast, the narrator and the audience share their empirical reality, implying that the events described are in principle directly accessible to both parties. In news genres, therefore, the “temporal proximity to the communicative ground” option is contextually available by default, and is used accordingly. This fact can be explained by assuming that the journalist and the audience are constantly aware of the conventional salience in news genres of the deictic center associated with the communicative ground including both the journalist and the audience.

A like reasoning could explain the fact that the feature article news genre, conventionally presenting news events from a subjective eyewitness perspective, allows the Simple Present tense to express *both* meanings. An important venue for further research, then, would be to investigate how the journalist and the audience manage to select the intended reading in contexts where one form can correspond to two fundamentally different readings, as in the case of the feature article genre. My findings suggest once more that genre conventions constitute a plausible starting point, as the experiential readings of the Simple Present tense in the corpus were restricted to very specific positions in the story structure. Subjectified narration use of the Simple Present occurred in the orientation and resolution parts of *all* of the feature articles analyzed. Historical present use was restricted to story climax parts in emotionally intense articles.

The idea that genre expectations play a distinct role in discourse interpretation is in line with results of psycholinguistic studies. Genre knowledge is comparable to linguistic and any other type of knowledge structured in scripts, such as “knowing how to behave in a restaurant”. Indeed, a large body of evidence suggests that language users employ various kinds of background knowledge when interpreting discourse (Zwaan and Rapp 2006).

From a linguistic theoretical point of view, an important area for further investigation concerns the actual operation of the interaction between genre knowledge and grammatical processes. How do language users resolve ambiguities that may arise from the polysemic character of linguistic forms? Are genre-specific interpretations actively construed in language? Or is it conceivable that genre knowledge forms an independent constraint on interpretation in the sense of Fauconnier (1994) where the potential meaning of a verb tense form is concerned? The results of the current study suggest that usage and interpretation patterns of verb tenses provide an excellent testing ground.

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Appendix

Below, the original Dutch versions of the fragments discussed in the paper and presented in English translation are listed. The numbers refer to the numbered fragments in the text.

- (1) (referred to as (5) in Section 2) (a) Ahmed had weinig reden tot klagen (b) toen hij zich na negen maanden wachten legaal in Nederland kon vestigen. (c) Al beschreef hij dat gedwongen verblijf in zijn moederland bij latere ruzies als een geweldig offer. (d) In december 2002 komt hij naar Nederland terug. (e) In april van dit jaar vallen de eerste klappen. (f) Hij trekt Heleens ketting kapot en (g) gooit een pan met kokend water naar haar. Mulder (2003).
- (2) Op de weg tussen Kaltern en Eppan werd zijn broer aangereden door een vrachtwagen. De chauffeur had hem niet zien lopen. Het was een zomerdag, vlak voor de oogst van de groenrode Gravensteiner. Zijn broer kwam zijn verwondingen niet te boven. Drie dagen en twee nachten doorstond hij de verschrikkelijkste pijnen. Toen verloor hij het leven. Van der Kwast (2012).

- (3) (referred to as (6) in Section 2) Naast me fietst een deftige heer op het weggetje en opeens knapt z'n achterband met een luide knal. De heer kijkt even naar beneden, kijkt een beetje lachend naar mij en fietst gewoon door. Jaspars (2001).
- (4) UTRECHT – Op de Wolvenstraat in Utrecht is een vrouw van haar tas beroofd. De vrouw werd door twee jonge mannen aangesproken en onder-tussen werd haar tas gepakt. Daarop zetten de twee het op een lopen. Agenten hebben de omgeving nog doorzocht, maar de mannen niet meer gevonden. De politie hoopt op getuigen. Brutale tasjesroof in Utrecht, no author mentioned (2012).
- (5) (a) Drie maanden is hij bij Floris blijven hangen. (...) (b) Hij vond het niet erg (c) dat we hem Hohoho bleven noemen. (d) We kortten het al gauw af tot Hoho (...) (e) Maar van de ene dag op de andere was hij verdwenen; (f) volgens sommigen had hij Floris' pinpas en laptop meegenomen, (g) maar Floris heeft dat nooit willen bevestigen. (h) Ik heb hem er ook nooit naar gevraagd, (i) en nu is het te laat, (j) we zijn elkaar al lang geleden uit het oog verloren (...) (k) Soms kom ik nog wel iemand op straat tegen, (l) en dan groet ik beleefd, (m) ik mis niemand. Van Essen (2015).
- (6) ([a] "Ik wil naar huis",) (b) zegt Heleen Mooiman (28) uit Den Haag. ([c] Die eenvoudige wens zal voorlopig niet in vervulling gaan. [d] Ze dankt dat aan de Haagse rechtbank, [e] die in augustus haar ex grootmoedig vrijliet, [f] twaalf dagen nadat hij haar zwaar had toegetakeld) [...] (j) De sporen zijn hier en daar nog zichtbaar. (k) Uit veiligheidsoverwegingen vindt het gesprek plaats in een café in een andere stad. (l) Ze houdt zich goed, (m) maar nu en dan wordt het haar te veel. Mulder (2003).
- (7) (a₁) De daders, (b) een 20-jarige man van Antilliaanse en een 19-jarige man van Nederlandse afkomst, (a₂) spraken zichzelf en elkaar tegen over de vraag (c) wie de schoten had gelost (d) en wie buiten op de uitkijk stond. (e) Officier van justitie I. Meissen kwam tot de conclusie (f) dat de 19-jarige de schoten moest hebben gelost (g) en eiste tegen hem daarom twaalf, en tegen de 20-jarige tien jaar cel. (h) De rechter neemt de conclusie over de werkverdeling over. (i) Volgens de rechtbank blijkt uit de beelden van bewakingscamera's onomstotelijk (j) dat de 19-jarige man de schoten heeft gelost. (k) Weliswaar was zijn gezicht op de beelden niet herkenbaar, (l) maar wel zijn schoenen. (m₁) Het verhaal van beide verdachten (n) dat zij hun schoenen onderweg hadden verwisseld, (m₂) acht de rechtbank ongeloofwaardig. Tien jaar cel voor moord bij pomp, no author mentioned (2003).

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